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Bring the Troops Home
Ending the Obsolete Korean Commitment

by Doug Bandow

Executive Summary

The U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea has been America's most consistently dangerous commitment since the end of World War II. Yet South Korea is beginning to look away from the United States for its defense. Newly elected President Roh Moo-hyun campaigned on a platform of revisiting the security relationship, and he has attempted to adopt the role of mediator between America and North Korea.

Recently attention has been focused on events in North Korea, but the North Korean nuclear controversy must be considered within the context of the U.S.-ROK security relationship. The future of America's relations with South Korea is complicated by Washington's unnatural military presence on the Korean peninsula, and no solution is likely until that unnatural presence is removed. The 37,000 U.S. troops in the South are a Cold War artifact, and the U.S.-ROK alliance—once considered valuable—must be reconsidered. It is time to restructure that relationship, and the United States and the ROK should begin planning for removal of all American forces from the Korean peninsula.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author and editor of several books, including Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World. *He is a former special assistant to President Reagan and visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation.*

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Introduction

The United States has defended South Korea for 50 years. The alliance with the Republic of Korea—actually a one-sided security guarantee—has been America's most consistently dangerous commitment since World War II. The nearly 34,000 deaths in the Korean War have been supplemented by more recent, occasional acts of war by North Korea.[1]

Yet South Korea, more formally the Republic of Korea, or ROK, is beginning to look away from the United States for its defense. Before leaving office President Kim Dae-jung attempted to chart an independent course between the United States and Pyongyang. Newly elected President Roh Moo-hyun suggested that his nation "mediate" in any war between America and the North and called for "concessions from both sides."[2] Indeed, he advocated that "we should proudly say we will not side with North Korea or the United States."[3]

Although attention understandably has recently focused on the resumption of North Korea's nuclear program, an equally important issue is the future of America's relations with South Korea. Indeed, the nuclear controversy grows out of Washington's unnatural military presence on the Korean peninsula, and no solution is likely until that unnatural presence is removed. Well before the present contretemps it was evident that the presence of 37,000 U.S. troops in the South was a Cold War artifact that had lost its raison d'être. Whatever value the U.S.-ROK alliance may once have had is fast disappearing. It is time to restructure that relationship with the goal of withdrawing American forces from the Korean peninsula.

A Changed Strategic Environment

Washington's commitment to the ROK resulted from the post–World War II division of the peninsula and subsequent Chinese and Soviet support for North Korean aggression. Although there was much to criticize in America's Korean policy between 1945 and 1950, once the North attacked in June 1950, only immediate and substantial U.S. military intervention could prevent a communist conquest. After the war ended, South Korea sported an unpopular, authoritarian government presiding over a primitive economy; but for Washington's promise to go to war, backed by an occupying garrison, Seoul would not likely have survived another attack.

Today the Cold War is over and China and Russia are friendlier with Seoul than with Pyongyang. Beijing and Moscow trade far more with the South, and the ROK has become a significant investor in the People's Republic of China. Russia has even shipped weapons to the ROK to help pay off its debts. Although both former Democratic People's Republic of Korea allies retain ties with the communist state—and, indeed, have competed a bit for influence over the last couple of years—both have far more at stake in the peninsula's continuing stability and South Korea's continuing prosperity than in a North Korean "victory," whether political or military.

Pyongyang has no other allies of note. With a trail of bad international debts and less than 1 percent of the South's foreign trade, the North is an insignificant economic player, and it is isolated diplomatically.[4]

The South has raced ahead of the North economically. Although the two countries began on a nearly equal footing, the South now enjoys a gross domestic product 40 times greater than that of the North. The South's population has flourished, growing to double that of the North, and the South possesses a vast technological edge. Of course, Seoul took a significant economic hit in the 1997 Asian economic crisis, but the ROK has recovered its status as one of Asia's tigers. In 2001 it enjoyed a GDP of $462 billion, making it the world's 12th largest economy.[5]

North Korea is in no position to compete. It is an economic wreck whose economy is estimated to have shrunk by half between

1993 and 1996 alone; its subsequent "recovery" is thought to have pushed per capita GDP to about $700, roughly 40 percent of the 1990 level.[6] Food production is down 60 percent over the last 15 years. Much of the country is enveloped in darkness much of the time. Life expectancy fell 10 percent during the 1990s; during the same decade hundreds of thousands of people, and perhaps as many as 2 million, starved to death. Nearly 6 in 10 North Koreans are thought to be malnourished.[7] Although the DPRK has avoided a repeat of the worst famine of the mid-1990s, it still cannot feed itself and has been reduced to begging for millions of tons of food aid.[8]

The North retains an advantage in the military sphere, but that advantage may be more apparent than real. The DPRK military is large but decrepit. Its latest weapons date to 1990; spare parts and training are nonexistent. Pyongyang's dramatic attempt to put a satellite into orbit in 1998 failed. Reports Defense Intelligence Agency analyst Bruce Bechtol: "The North Korean military is one that is using antiquated 1950s and 1960s vintage weapons while the South Korean military continues to strengthen itself with dynamic new programs such as the building of brand new F-16s. In addition, the South is superior in other key aspects of military readiness, such as command and control and training."[9]

Although South Korea's ground forces are smaller, they would be fighting on the defensive with superior air and naval support. Indeed, in the initial stage of any war, South Korea would have to rely primarily on its own military for ground forces, irrespective of America's defense commitment. It would take the United States three or more weeks to deploy heavy armored and mechanized reinforcements, depending on events elsewhere and available lift capabilities.[10]

Moreover, South Korea has begun a serious space program, and the ROK hopes to launch a satellite in two years. That would provide the South with intelligence-gathering capabilities, which would reduce its reliance on American intelligence.[11] Seoul also has unveiled plans for a blue water navy, one more obviously directed at Japan and China than at North Korea, which lacks an advanced force.[12] Observed one American military analyst, "As the perceived threat from the NKPA [North Korean People's Army] has diminished, the ROK military has looked ahead and attempted to develop military capabilities to reduce its dependence on the United States and to meet future security challenges."[13]

To the extent that the ROK's military lags behind that of its northern antagonist, it is a matter of choice, not necessity. There is no special gravitational field that prevents Seoul from building a larger force. Rather, there is an American tripwire—a nominal military presence that is intended solely to ensure American involvement in the event of military action by the North—that discourages South Korea's investing in its own defense. By one estimate, recreating America's defense capabilities would cost $30 billion, twice South Korea's present annual defense budget.[14] Seoul admits that it "concentrated on its economic and social development" while North Korea emphasized military production.[15]

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The Evolving Korean Relationship

For decades the South Korean people have been connected to the North by obvious cultural, ethnic, and family ties. At the same time, however, South Koreans are repelled by a brutal totalitarian dictatorship that impoverished its own people while threatening those in the South. The Cold War lasted longer on the Korean peninsula than anywhere else; still, although relations remain difficult, nearly a half century of open hostility has ebbed.

Seeming breakthroughs often beckoned during the crisis years. In 1972 the two Koreas signed a reconciliation agreement and halted hostile propaganda. The accord, however, which also endorsed reunification, promised inter-Korean exchanges, and pro-

vided for a bilateral telephone hot line, soon collapsed. In 1990 the two nations' prime ministers met; soon thereafter they inked disarmament and economic cooperation agreements. Then came the first nuclear crisis. A planned summit in 1994 between North Korea's Kim Il-sung and South Korea's Kim Young-sam never materialized: Kim Il-sung died of a heart attack just 17 days before the meeting was scheduled to begin. Relations rapidly soured after Kim Jong-il, the son and long-anointed heir, took control following his father's death, and the North returned to threats and aggressive action.

Hopes rose again six years later. South Korean president Kim Dae-jung's dramatic visit to Pyongyang in 2000 prompted a wave of euphoria among many Koreans. The chances of war seemed remote and reunification possible. The two Koreas ended propaganda broadcasts across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and came to speedy agreement on an initial experiment in family reunification. Aid and investment flowed north.

The DPRK began cautiously to address the need for economic reform while reaching out to Asian, European, and even Latin American states. Regional analysts began talking about potential membership in such international organizations as the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum. Even Stephen Bosworth, America's ambassador to Seoul, shared in the optimism, arguing, "North Korea does not have a vested interest in delay and will be interested in moving this process forward."[16] President Kim Dae-jung declared, "The danger of war on the Korean peninsula has disappeared."[17]

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Still, critics warned of the North's "sophisticated extortion."[18] Momentum stalled. Kim Jong-il failed to reciprocate with a visit to Seoul following Kim Dae-jung's visit to the North. Negotiations with the North proved difficult, and planned family reunions were eventually cancelled. Provocations, including a naval shootout in 2002, signaled a possible return to conflict between the North and the South.

Little progress was made in the DPRK's relations with Japan and the United States. North Korea complained of alleged stinginess on the part of the United States and the Japanese in the area of economic assistance. And, most important, the military threat remained omnipresent, with the mass of the North's forces spring-loaded close to the DMZ.

Last September's dramatic summit between Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan and Kim Jong-il occurred despite Washington's ill-concealed displeasure. Kim's apology for repeated abductions of Japanese citizens was a shocking admission by the ruler of a state that has always maintained the near-divinity and infallibility of its leadership. His explanation was incomplete, however, and had the effect of exacerbating Japanese suspicions.[19] Talks about recognition and aid, initially expected to be simple, were called off amid mutual acrimony.[20]

The following month came the trip by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly to Pyongyang, which seemed to signal the possibility of improved U.S.-DPRK relations. But Kelly charged the North with cheating on the so-called Agreed Framework, which froze the DPRK's nuclear activities in 1994 in exchange for construction of two light-water nuclear reactors and regular shipments of oil. By enriching uranium other than the spent nuclear fuel rods, which remained in storage, Pyongyang violated the agreement's spirit, if not its exact terms. Kelly's visit sparked North Korea's admission that it was actively processing nuclear material, which, combined with Washington's refusal to talk and the allies' cutoff of additional fuel shipments, has led the North to take a series of increasingly provocative steps in recent months.

This worrisome spiral toward confrontation occurred in the midst of a bitter presidential campaign in the South. Many observers, especially in the United States, forecast a victory by the more conservative Lee Hoi-chang. After all, President Kim Dae-

jung was bedeviled by scandal; his Millennium Democratic Party's candidate, Roh Moo-hyun, had a leftist pedigree; and the MDP suffered an embarrassing breakup of its electoral alliance with an independent candidate on election eve. Most important, in this view, Kim's "sunshine policy" of engagement combined with aid to the North had failed and was unpopular.

The policy was controversial. The South appears to have essentially paid for the Kim-Kim summit through a nearly $200 million transfer to the North by Hyundai, which has several investment projects in the DPRK.[21]

Nevertheless, Roh, a strong supporter of Kim's policy, won the presidential election last December. Not only did his victory defy the conventional wisdom, but Roh actually improved on Kim's vote totals from five years before. One factor in Roh's victory was the softening of many South Koreans' opinion of the North.[22] Belligerent and aggressive as North Korea remains, its behavior has improved over the last 10 years. North Korea has reached out to the leaders of South Korea and Japan, has opened embassies in a variety of Asian and European nations, and has participated in East Asian regional organizations.[23] Although negative incidents, such as a naval clash in the West Sea in June 2002, continued to mar the North-South relationship, a variety of cooperative initiatives proceeded. Those ventures included the establishment of a military hot line, allowing divided family members to meet, and several joint sports competitions.[24] Aidan Foster-Carter of Leeds University reports that South Korea's Unification Ministry "tallied North-South interaction in 2002 overall as the most intensive ever since regular contacts started, haltingly, in 1989."[25] Trade between the two countries exceeded $560 million from January to November 2002, making South Korea second only to China in terms of trade with the North.[26]

Senior North Korean officials, starting with Kim Jong-il, know that their nation is in desperate straits.[27] Officials in Pyongyang readily acknowledge the nation's poverty and recognize the urgent need for development. Former U.S. ambassador to South Korea and chairman of the Korea Society Don Gregg believes that Kim Jong-il "demonstrates a willingness to learn from neighboring countries' economic policies and to differentiate his rule from that of his father, Kim Il Sung."[28] The point is not that Kim Jong-il has become a born-again democrat whose heart bleeds for the starving masses but that he recognizes small nations with collapsing economies and hungry populations rate very low on the international scale, and he wants to do something about it. Only such a desire could have animated the DPRK's economic reforms of late: creating a free enterprise zone for foreign investment, granting discretion to managers of state companies and urging them to make *profits*, raising salaries, and lifting some price controls.[29]

Nevertheless, those reforms are obviously not enough. Introducing a few rational economic incentives into a system that remains utterly irrational may benefit a few people, but it cannot transform the North Korean economy. North Koreans would have trouble responding to even the most sensible incentives, given that agricultural land, transportation infrastructure, and industrial plants are all in decay.[30]

This series of half measures may have disrupted, as much as aided, the faltering North Korean economy. Even so, South Korean voters indicated their desire to keep the North moving in the direction of reform. In Roh they chose as president someone firmly committed to engagement. One of Roh's advisers said, "Negotiating with Kim Jong Il is the easiest way to change North Korea."[31] For his part, Roh has emphasized the importance of avoiding "mistrust," which raises questions of whether he is naive about dealing with the totalitarian North.[32] *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, for one, questions Roh's credulity but concludes that President Roh is "simply trying to send a conciliatory message to Pyongyang."[33] The truth of Kristof's judgment will undoubtedly be tested many times during Roh's term.

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Regional Realities

Although senior military planners viewed the Korean peninsula as strategically unimportant in the years leading up to the North's invasion of the South in June 1950, the United States was prompted to come to the South's aid by the belief that the invasion was orchestrated by Moscow.[34]

It wasn't, but the Cold War gave strategic importance to an otherwise irrelevant conflict in a distant land. The Korean peninsula remained linked to the Cold War until the waning days of the USSR.

Russia's role has changed considerably in the last 10 years. Moscow signaled Seoul's victory in the inter-Korea competition when it recognized South Korea in 1990; since then the two have established friendly ties, with Moscow playing the role of economic supplicant.

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In contrast, Moscow's relationship with the DPRK went into a deep freeze, marked by Boris Yeltsin's decision to cut Russia's defense commitment to the North. Since July 2000 Pyongyang has been trying to reestablish strong contacts with Russia. The two countries exchanged summit visits; Russia agreed to provide limited defensive equipment (such as interceptors and surveillance equipment); and Russia and the DPRK held joint naval maneuvers in November 2002. However, Moscow has carefully avoided making any burdensome financial or security commitments that might damage Russia's relationship with South Korea. If forced to choose between the two Koreas, Moscow would almost certainly end up in the South's corner.

The People's Republic of China is another critical regional player. China seems committed to the survival of the North Korean regime. The PRC is the North's largest trading partner, with two-way trade amounting to $740 million, one-fourth of Pyongyang's total. China also continues to provide some aid to North Korea, though it cut back its subsidized grain shipments in 1995.[35] As of 2002, Beijing accounted for about 70 percent of the North's oil supplies and a substantial share of its grain and vegetable sales.[36] Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, the North's decision to negotiate away the 1994 crisis closely followed the report in a pro-Beijing newspaper that the PRC would halt aid and trade in response to UN sanctions.[37]

Nevertheless, the PRC's leverage on the Korean peninsula has declined. Over the North's strenuous objections, China recognized the South in 1992, and Beijing now has much at stake in its relationship with Seoul. Two-way trade exceeds $30 billion, 40 times more than that with the North. Meanwhile, annual South Korean investment in the PRC has run as high as $900 million; the PRC competes with America as the leading overseas destination of ROK capital.[38] Observes E. Wayne Merry of the American Foreign Policy Council:

> South Korean businessmen see the Chinese market as a very desirable alternative to their dependence on American consumers and have mapped out ambitious goals for production facilities in China to avoid some of the labor and legal problems they face at home. . . . ROK President Kim Dae-jung [singled] out China for special praise as a "millennia partner" in his New Year's address at the start of 2002, saying, "Korea and China have a special relationship. If you look at the geographic proximity, you can see that relations between the two countries cannot but get closer."[39]

Given the current state of economic affairs, Beijing would prefer not to have to choose between the two Koreas. On a strategic level, analysts widely believe that the PRC prefers a divided peninsula to a Korea united under American domination. Still, although China cannot be considered a sure ally of Seoul, it most certainly is no longer a patron of the North. Today the DPRK has no true friends in East Asia.

The Unnatural American Relationship

Although some South Korean leftists have blamed Washington for Korea's division, the alternative in the early 1950s would have been full control by Kim Il-sung. Under such a scenario those same leftists, along with any other principled political activists, would be dead or imprisoned, and their fellow-citizens would be impoverished and oppressed. Division was bad, but it was not the worst alternative.

Relations between the United States and the ROK have long been complex. Washington's willingness to accommodate a variety of ugly regimes led to substantial popular criticism of the United States.[40] Leftwing students regularly targeted America; the democracy movement in the summer of 1987 drew in more established members of the middle class as well. Seoul's welcome move to democracy eliminated that embarrassment, but changing perceptions of the threat posed by the North combined with increasing national self-confidence in South Korea are posing perhaps an even greater challenge to bilateral relations.

Anti-American sentiment has burst forth as the ROK has improved its relationship with Pyongyang. President Kim Dae-jung had barely set foot back in Seoul after the 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il before thousands of students took to the streets demanding that the Americans go home. Protesters also used June 25, the 50th anniversary of the war's start, as an opportunity to demand Washington's withdrawal. Amidst the summit euphoria an American soldier was sentenced to eight years in prison for murdering a South Korean bar waitress who refused to have sex with him. The case rekindled public anger over the status of forces agreement (SOFA) governing the legal status of American troops in Korea.

U.S. forces are ubiquitous in the South, even though they are not needed to guard against the bankrupt North. American soldiers are high-profile travelers at Seoul's international airport, and many are based at the 630-acre Yongsan Army Garrison in downtown Seoul.[41] American troops in the heart of South Korea are often involved in purposeless violent altercations and tragic traffic deaths.

More recently, anger toward the United States has spilled out of universities and into the middle class. That anger seems to have grown along with the nuclear crisis.[42] Explains Kim Sung-han of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security: "Anti-Americanism is getting intense. It used to be widespread and not so deep. Now it's getting widespread and deep."[43]

Signs of rising resentment are everywhere. Following the demonstrations in 2000, the U.S. military established a "civil disturbance hot line" and, in the aftermath of the murder of an Army officer at a shopping mall, warned of anti-American "strike squads."[44] Demonstrations erupted again in November 2002 after the acquittal in military court of two soldiers charged in the accidental deaths of two Korean girls.[45] Americans have been barred from restaurants, jeered, and in a few cases physically attacked.[46] One soldier was even kidnapped by a mob after another serviceman refused to accept a leaflet attacking the United States over the deaths of the two children.[47] Some Koreans are boycotting U.S. goods.[48]

Newly elected President Roh has called for a more "equal" relationship and promised not to "kowtow" to Washington.[49] All of the recent presidential candidates, including conservative Lee Hoi-chang, demanded a change in the SOFA, long a source of controversy.[50] The United States, after demonstrating initial reluctance, now seems prepared to change the treatment of American service personnel.[51] The two governments have set up a task force to review the present agreement, which covers a variety of issues involving the investigation and custody of U.S. soldiers accused of crimes.[52]

However, even assuming that South Korean courts are fair and today's rampant anti-Americanism won't spill over into the

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judicial system, it would not be fair to U.S. soldiers to station them in another land to protect others while leaving them vulnerable to the vagaries of foreign prosecution. And fairness can no longer be guaranteed: the three soldiers victimized by a Korean mob were charged with assault by the South Korean police, while those who beat them and kidnapped one of them escaped prosecution.[53] Put bluntly, the SOFA is part of the price a country pays when it is a de facto protectorate.[54] The relationship between the two countries will never be one of equals so long as South Korea is dependent on Washington for its defense. The United States cannot be expected to risk war on another nation's terms. So long as America protects the ROK, it will rightly demand special treatment for its soldiers.

Restructuring the Security Relationship

Although polls show that a majority of South Koreans still support the U.S. troop presence, a majority also pronounce their dislike of America.[55] This is an incendiary base for the next traffic incident or policy disagreement. Foster-Carter complains of the South's attitudes toward the United States: "The U.S. is resented as a bully, just as Japan is forever a war criminal. Conversely, China—despite repressing North Korean refugees—is seen as a benign protector, and North Korea indulged as a wayward sibling."[56]

Some Americans hope that those sentiments will recede and everything will go back to normal. For instance, journalist Michael Breen believes anti-American hostility is but a "passing emotion."[57] However, the ROK will never go back to the Korea of 1953, which was dramatically aware that its independence was based solely on American support in the face of communist aggression from the North. Accordingly, it is well past time to restructure the U.S.–South Korean security relationship.

That relationship has reached a turning point for many reasons. First, as noted earlier, people's perceptions of North Korea are changing. One sign of the shift is the increasing willingness of ROK textbooks to acknowledge Kim Il-sung's role (much overstated in the North, of course) as an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader.[58] More disturbing is the development of naively favorable views of the North. For instance, some South Koreans believe that the North would never use nuclear weapons against them.[59] One told the *Washington Post*: "I want North Koreans to develop nuclear weapons. After all, we are one nation."[60] When asked which is "the friendliest nation toward South Korea," more South Korean children identify the DPRK than America.[61] Most bizarre, the ROK government no longer publishes a defense "white paper" because it doesn't want to designate the DPRK as its "main enemy."[62]

Second, the generation grateful for American aid in the Korean War is passing from the scene; 82 percent of the population in South Korea was born after the war. Explained one diplomat from the older generation: "It may be difficult for us to sustain the same mood we grew up with. We know the US helped us. But those under 40 . . . aren't swayed by what we think."[63]

And those younger people, who will make up an increasing share of the electorate, tend to focus more on past U.S. support for various authoritarian military regimes in Korea and the indignities (and tragedies) of a foreign troop presence.[64] Whereas anti-Americanism in the 1980s was directed at U.S. backing for military dictators, it now also emanates "from enhanced confidence and pride in the nation," observes Gi-Wook Shin of the Asia/Pacific Research Center at Stanford University.[65] Thus, as the ROK continues to develop, anti-American sentiments will not only spread but will likely grow stronger.

Perceived American arrogance adds fuel to the fire. A student complained that "the US acts as boss of the world."[66] More ominous, those sentiments are shared by a Korean war veteran, who said: "At the time of the war, I was very thankful for the Americans. But now I have a negative image of them because

they are acting like oppressors—they are too unilateral."[67]

Some students blame Washington for the peninsula's continuing division. "The US government is in Korea to divide us. The US wants us weak and divided. They are not here for our security," charged one.[68] Said 28-year-old consultant Choi Mee-jin, "It's the U.S. that's a threat to us, not North Korea."[69] Not surprisingly, Pyongyang exploits those sentiments.

Even South Koreans who resist the rising anti-American sentiment perceive the decreasing utility of the American troop presence. Few policymakers with whom I have spoken believe that Pyongyang has either the will or the ability to stage a successful invasion; those who desire the continued presence of American soldiers point to other possible threats, most notably Japan.[70] Yet the belief that Tokyo is likely to attempt to relive its colonial past on the peninsula is nothing more than a paranoid fantasy.

A growing number of policy differences between the United States and South Korea are a third major factor contributing to the need for a fundamental reappraisal of the security arrangement. Those policy differences will likely worsen as the crisis over North Korea's nuclear program persists. In late January 2003, President Kim Dae-jung criticized the United States for refusing to meet directly with North Korea.[71] At the same time, Washington was pushing the issue toward the UN Security Council, which, in Seoul's view, would short-circuit the diplomatic process. Shortly thereafter the Bush administration pointedly observed that military action remained a viable option for dealing with the North, generating a nearly hysterical response from Seoul.

So poisonous had become the U.S.-ROK bilateral atmosphere that many Koreans suspected Washington of arranging the nuclear crisis to boost defeated opposition candidate Lee Hoi-chang's candidacy. The seizure of the North Korean vessel carrying Scuds for Yemen similarly was seen as an attempt to manipulate South Korean voters by diverting attention from last year's accident involving U.S. servicemen and two Korean girls.[72] The idea of encouraging the North to restart its nuclear program in order to influence the election in the South is obviously absurd, yet some Americans did demand that the Bush administration intervene to try to elect Lee.[73]

Roh Moo-hyun emerged victorious despite Washington's preference for his chief competitor. A decade ago, as an opposition lawyer who fought military rule, Roh had called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.[74] Roh ran on an explicit peace platform that sharply diverged from U.S. policy. He owes his narrow election victory to rising popular antagonism toward the United States. That antagonism is particularly tied to the presence of American troops.[75]

Of course, as happens so often after a divisive election, Roh has tried to moderate his position. When visiting the U.S. military headquarters after the vote, he conceded that there were "some voices of anti-Americanism in Korea," but he went on to state that "the number of those voices is small, and the chances of their leading public opinion is even smaller."[76] Indeed, he went so far as to say that the alliance "was precious, is now still precious and will continue to be important in the future."[77]

But those statements contradict Roh's professed intentions. Roh complains that changes in U.S. troop levels in Korea "have been determined by the United States based on its strategic consideration, without South Korea's consent."[78] Accordingly, Roh has reportedly ordered the ROK military to prepare for a reduction or withdrawal of U.S. forces.[79] He explained in one speech: "Although we don't know if it might take 10, 20 or 30 years, someone has to consider an independent defense. Senior military officials have to prepare a plan for a special emergency situation when the U.S. Army moves away."[80]

Washington has responded with a series of "reforms" that are mere Band-Aids. In addition to entertaining modest changes to the SOFA, the Bush administration is reportedly considering shrinking the number of American installations in South Korea from

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41 to 25 over the next decade, but that is too little change over too long a period. Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's suggestion that U.S. forces be pulled back from the DMZ would do nothing to transform relations; instead, such a move would reveal the limited utility of American forces. American forces are a tripwire placed in harm's way to ensure that the full force of the United States would be engaged in the event of an incursion by North Korean forces into the ROK. But a tripwire in, say, Pusan is a tripwire with no value.

Half measures do not address the basic problem of unnecessary military dependence. Generational change alone ensures rising opposition to America's continued presence. The population with first-hand knowledge of American assistance during the Korean War is being progressively superseded by those who view the United States solely as an occupying force on the peninsula. Accordingly, friction between Korean civilians and American forces will continue.

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Sending the Troops Home

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For years it was hard to find a single American analyst, let alone policymaker, who did not recoil in horror at the suggestion that American forces be brought home from Korea. Defenders of the commitment rushed to the barricades in the midst of Kim Dae-jung's visit to Pyongyang. For instance, Robert Manning of the Council on Foreign Relations warned against the "loose talk about the future of the U.S.–South Korean alliance and the U.S. military presence in Korea."[81]

Even after Roh's election, U.S. Department of Defense consultant Richard Weitz advocates a continued U.S. presence for the purpose of "rapidly halting any North Korean invasion," as if South Korea's 700,000-man military didn't exist.[82] Former secretary of defense William J. Perry, Ashton B. Carter, and Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, leading figures in the Clinton administration, offer the cliché of America's and South Korea's troops standing "shoulder to shoulder to deter North Korean aggression."[83] Left unanswered is the question of why American shoulders are necessary in the first place.

Some analysts would move to strengthen and expand the U.S. commitment to South Korea. Ralph Cossa, president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Pacific Forum, wants a force buildup.[84] So does the Heritage Foundation.[85] The *Weekly Standard*'s Bill Kristol wants efforts aimed at "shoring up the defense capabilities of South Korea."[86] The Bush administration seems to be taking those recommendations to heart: in early February 2003 Washington announced that it was supplementing its forces in Asia in response to a request from Adm. Thomas Fargo, Pacific commander of U.S. forces.[87]

But now a growing number of commentators, including some resolute hawks, are saying that the United States need not remain in Korea, and certainly not if our forces are unwanted.[88] The message has hit home even at the Pentagon. More broadly, notes Scott Snyder, the Asia Foundation's representative in Korea, "In Washington, within the U.S. government and Congress, there is a distinct, anti-Korean backlash."[89]

Of course, it would be better for future relations to present a U.S. withdrawal as a result of changing geopolitical circumstances rather than an expression of national pique. A precipitous withdrawal conducted under a cloud of suspicion and recriminations could further divide Korean society and create additional animus toward the United States.[90] In contrast, Ed Olsen of the Naval Postgraduate School advocates creating "a realistic timetable, perhaps two to three years, for modifying the U.S.-ROK alliance in ways that induce far more bilateral equality and reciprocity in the forms of defense burden-sharing and policy decision-making."[91] Over the longer term the United States

would decide on the degree of its involvement in the region, with options ranging from "deep engagement or entanglement" to "far more limited roles such as an offshore balancer."[92] Olsen favors the latter option, complete with the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces.[93] A firm deadline for troop withdrawal is critical.

Not being wanted would be a legitimate justification for a U.S. withdrawal. As Kristof observes, "We can't want to protect South Koreans more than they want to be protected."[94] On the other hand, their wanting to be protected does not justify a continued U.S. presence. Another nation's desire for U.S. aid is no reason to provide it. On the contrary, America should provide assistance solely in order to advance American national interests.

Today the U.S.-ROK alliance is an endless series of costs: unnecessary financial expense, growing anger and hostility from those we are defending, certain U.S. involvement in a horrific war should one break out, and likely blame by many South Koreans and their neighbors for the war's start. In the meantime, observes Adam Garfinkle, editor of the *National Interest*, the United States has "the privilege of fruitlessly negotiating with Pyongyang."[95]

Given the costs and risks, policymakers would be well advised to ask what vital U.S. interest is being served by the presence of U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula. The raison d'être for Washington's defense of the ROK has disappeared. America's presence undoubtedly still helps to deter the DPRK from military adventurism, but it does not follow that the U.S. presence is necessary.[96] As noted earlier, the South can stand on its own. A recent report from the conservative-leaning Center for Strategic and International Studies said simply, "Without U.S. help, South Korea is capable today of defending itself against an invasion from the North."[97] That is particularly true given that such an invasion would be supported by no other nation, and certainly not by the DPRK's old allies China and Russia.

Of course, replacing the American tripwire might be an expensive proposition for South Korea. If Seoul chose to confront the North's military, it would have to beef up existing force structure and invest in areas, such as long-range attack and intelligence-imaging capabilities, now dominated by Washington. But as one of the globe's wealthiest nations South Korea is eminently capable of providing for its own defense—and the government studied the possibility of doing so as recently as last year.[98]

What if Seoul prefers not to make such investments? Of course, South Korea could underestimate the threat and fail to bolster its forces; the North might miscalculate and believe that it could win a blitzkrieg campaign even with its antiquated military. The result under this highly unlikely scenario would be an awful war, but there is little doubt that the ROK would ultimately prevail in such a conflict.[99]

In any case, Washington cannot be expected to forever protect other nations from their own potential folly. The ROK has matured as a country and should face the consequences of its own decisions. A mistake would be tragic but, unlike during the Cold War, would no longer be catastrophic for the United States. It should not be the American purpose to defend those who believe defense is unnecessary.

Former secretary of defense William Cohen complains that a U.S. withdrawal "would have the effect of telling the South Korean people that they're on their own."[100] But that's precisely what Washington *should* tell the South. The United States should set a firm deadline for ending its security guarantee; it should begin phasing out its military forces immediately.[101]

Some argue that maybe American troops should be withdrawn, only just not now. "Talk of withdrawal could send the wrong signal to both friend and foe alike," worries syndicated columnist Donald Lambro.[102] Former *New York Times* correspondent Richard Halloran says such a step "would be tantamount to surrender" but doesn't explain why.[103] That old refrain, however, was sung even before President Jimmy Carter moved in early 1977 to fulfill a campaign promise to bring most of the troops home.[104] For some analysts and

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policymakers, there will never be a good time to update U.S. policy.

However, even the hawkish Robyn Lim, a professor of international politics at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan, dismisses the argument that a U.S. withdrawal would be interpreted as a strategic reversal. Lim argues: "Some might think that such a policy would play into the hands of Pyongyang's Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il. But keeping U.S. forces in South Korea against the wishes of the government in Seoul would also further Pyongyang's agenda."[105] Richard V. Allen, national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan, argues that the South "can plan to assume eventual responsibility for its own frontline defense" and that doing so would "be neither destabilizing nor provocative."[106]

Subsidizing the defense of populous and prosperous allies involves a substantial redistribution of wealth from Americans to, in this case, Japanese and Koreans.

Some supporters of the U.S. troop presence imagine retaining bases even after reunification.[107] Advocates of a permanent U.S. occupation talk grandly of regional stability and preparedness for regional contingencies. However, it would be a miraculous coincidence if a commitment forged during the Cold War and created to deter a ground invasion from a contiguous neighbor would function equally well—or perhaps even better—without adjustment to meet future contingencies, despite the collapse of the potential aggressor and the disappearance of its hegemonic allies. One cannot help but suspect that the means has become the end, to be preserved irrespective of changes in the regional and global security environment.

Observers commonly argue that the U.S. presence in Korea is designed to achieve multiple geopolitical goals.[108] But that argument is also outmoded. In fact, there is nothing left for America's soldiers to do. The future course of Chinese-U.S. relations is uncertain, but Beijing is not an inevitable enemy. Moreover, China's defense buildup remains modest and poses no threat to America's survival.[109] America's deployments in Korea would be of little use in any case. It is highly unlikely that ground forces would be used in a conflict with China; no U.S. administration would initiate a ground invasion of that state.

The suggestion that U.S. troops in Korea could help contain a resurgent Tokyo is even more fanciful. Tokyo should be doing more militarily, despite disquiet among its neighbors, but to argue that Japan is about to embark on another imperialist rampage is to engage in scaremongering. Cohen's worry that a conventional pullout from South Korea would spark Japan to develop nuclear weapons is equally implausible because it is predicated on a long daisy chain of events with all of the intermediate steps removed.[110] Moreover, the hypothetical end result of a nuclear-armed Japan is still likely to be better than the alternative of American involvement in a regional confrontation involving the PRC.

Finally, some maintain that a "power vacuum" might be created if Washington backs away from defending Japan and the ROK. Lt. Col. Carl E. Haselden Jr. of the U.S. Marine Corps worries that "the instability between nations with combined strong economies and militaries could lead to an arms race having detrimental effects on regional stability and the global economy."[111]

But such future economic problems are speculative, to say the least. Moreover, the current U.S.-ROK relationship has important economic ramifications: subsidizing the defense of populous and prosperous allies involves a substantial redistribution of wealth from Americans to, in this case, Japanese and Koreans. Their economies may gain from that process, but the U.S. economy does not; instead, the American taxpayers bear the added military burden.

Further, the United States markedly reduces the likelihood of its own involvement in war if it leaves to populous and prosperous allies the responsibility of building up adequate deterrent forces. Should conflict come with the PRC, it likely would grow out of a dispute between Beijing and an American ally, something to be avoided now that there is no longer a global hegemonic struggle and Washington's friends can deploy powerful defensive forces. The Heritage Foundation's Larry Wortzel worries

about rivalries among China, Japan, Russia, and the two Koreas. "Three of the five nations have nuclear weapons," he says, "and, in the case of North Korea, seem willing to use them."[112] But why on earth would Washington want to be in the middle of such rivalries if no substantial American interests are at stake? It is precisely the sort of conflict to be avoided.

Cohen also fears that India would be "potentially motivated to expand its capabilities in reaction to Chinese stratagems."[113] That should not bother Washington. In fact, it would be a highly positive step for the United States, since New Delhi already poses an important counterweight to Chinese ambitions in Southeast Asia and is likely to become an even more significant player in coming years.[114] The alternative could be a government in New Delhi that aligns with China and Russia to counterbalance America's push for global dominance.[115]

Other arguments against a change in policy border on the bizarre. For example, Haselden, in a recent issue of the U.S. Army War College Quarterly *Parameters*, writes of "such transnational threats as terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, and infectious diseases."[116] What, one wonders, would troops in Korea do to combat AIDS? Does the Air Force plan on bombing opium fields in Burma? Why shouldn't South Korea—along with other nations in the region—deploy ships to combat piracy? As for the problem of terrorism, it requires accurate local intelligence and sustained police action, not the intervention of thousands of U.S. soldiers.

In sum, without any connection to the Cold War that ended over a decade ago, and absent a global hegemonic struggle, Korea is relatively unimportant to the United States from a military and strategic standpoint.

Maintaining the Friendship Nonetheless

Cutting the U.S. security commitment to South Korea does not mean ending close cooperation and friendship between the two countries. Intelligence sharing and port access rights would be beneficial for both nations. Depending on the direction inter-Korean relations take, the ROK might become interested in cooperating with Washington in developing a missile defense and possibly nuclear weapons.

Cultural ties between the two states would remain strong. Family and friends span the Pacific, as a result of the millions of Americans who have served in South Korea and the hundreds of thousands of Koreans who have immigrated to America. More than 1.2 million Americans identified themselves as Korean in the 2000 census.[117] Indeed, Americans are likely to receive a warmer welcome if our fractious military relationship is replaced by one based on commerce. An equal, cooperative relationship between the governments is more likely once the ROK is no longer dependent on America for its defense.

Finally, economic ties will remain strong after an American troop withdrawal. Korea is America's seventh largest trading partner, with two-way trade totaling $57.4 billion in 2001.[118] An obvious step forward would be a free trade agreement. In May 2001, even before congressional approval of President Bush's Trade Promotion Authority, Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), then chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, introduced legislation authorizing the U.S. Trade Representative to negotiate such an agreement.[119] The ROK has already inked a trade accord with Chile and is discussing the possibility of doing so with Japan.[120]

Investment flows both ways. The United States is a leading source of foreign direct investment in South Korea. At the same time, total Korean investment in America rose above $3.1 billion, 40 percent of the ROK's total. The United States competes with China as the leading destination for Korean overseas investment and is ahead of all other nations.[121] That trend is likely to continue as South Korean businesses grow in size, expertise, and resources.

In sum, South Koreans have built a vital, powerful, and growing nation. The best way

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for America and the ROK to achieve the sort of "equal" relationship desired by so many Koreans is to eliminate the ROK's status as an American defense protectorate.

Conclusion

According to Hyung Kook Kim, director of the Center for Asian Studies at American University, "The U.S.–South Korean alliance is simply too important for both countries."[122] But that is an assertion, not an argument. The alliance is important to whom? And why? Absent convincing, compelling answers to those and other questions, the U.S.–South Korean security relationship must be terminated. It should no longer be sufficient to argue implicitly, as Seoul and Washington have done for decades, that that which is must always be.

Alliances exist to serve a purpose: namely, to provide collective defense against common threats. Yet in Korea the means have become an end. America pays the bill but gains little benefit from doing so. Indeed, it is finding ingratitude replacing appreciation.

"Absent a compelling new rationale for its continuation, this alliance will come under mounting pressure for revision," admits Nicholas Eberstadt.[123] As well it should. Washington no longer need prepare for a second war on the Korean peninsula.

America's military presence is not necessary to protect the South. U.S. troops play no role in constraining China, since no administration is likely to be foolish enough to embark on a ground war with Beijing. It is even less plausible to argue that U.S. troops are needed to defend against Japan. Accordingly, those troops should be brought home and their units should be demobilized. Once the withdrawal is completed, the misnamed mutual defense treaty should be terminated, to be replaced with a variety of less formal forms of military cooperation.

Ending America's force presence would also be in the ROK's interest. The relationship's diminishing utility is most evident in the South. Seoul bears the cost of hosting foreign troops, runs the risk of having its security controlled by a self-centered great power, and craves the respect due a country moving toward the first rank of nations. It was one thing for South Koreans to welcome American troops on their soil when their nation was a supplicant, desiring protection from imminent invasion. It is quite another for them to do so when that threat has diminished and their own country is capable of defending itself. In the future, it is inconceivable that a proud people in a proud nation will accept U.S. garrisons if they perceive those garrisons as directed at promoting American rather than Korean interests throughout the region.

The growing North Korean nuclear crisis—in which saber rattling has turned into a provocative spiral marked by threats of war—only makes an American withdrawal more necessary. In designing U.S. policy it is important to remember which nation is the superpower and which is the impoverished wreck. The *Weekly Standard* fears "living in a world in which our very existence is contingent on the whims of unstable tyrants."[124] Yet it is the regime in Pyongyang whose survival is tenuous. America is threatened primarily because America insists on remaining next door to an unstable regime desperately seeking legitimacy.

Deterring a nuclear North Korea is an important goal, but that goal is best achieved by placing responsibility on other regional parties.[125] In short, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from East Asia will reduce the dangers to American citizens while returning responsibility for regional stability to the ROK and its neighbors. Only by withdrawing can America force other states to act.

Washington tends to think only of itself. President Roh's election is "a big headache," complained one U.S. official to *The Economist*.[126] A military official in South Korea described "a real sense of mourning" after Roh's victory.[127] But the ROK has grown up and is entitled to elect its own leaders, assess its own interests, and chart its own course. America and South Korea have grown

apart. Even if the countries avoid a crisis in the coming months, they will only delay the inevitable, and the costs—to American prestige and bilateral goodwill—will only increase over time. Washington's security guarantee has lost its raison d'être. It's time for an amicable divorce rather than a much more bitter parting in the near future.

Notes

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10. See, for example, David Lague and Murray Hiebert, "Leaving Asia Exposed," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 6, 2003, p. 14.

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